Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

CURSING AS A FINE ART

All of us will remember that we have heard the "man on the street" using, at sundry times and under sundry circumstances, a certain monosyllable of Latin origin—a word which is admittedly always emphatic even if it is not always absolutely necessary. Indeed, for so many centuries has it been used by the ancestors of our "man on the street" that Beaumarchais was led to describe it as a fundamental of the English language. Whether or not this is to be taken in the sense in which the observant Frenchman meant it to be taken, it is at least true that the little word in playing the rôle of Jack-of-all-trades among the parts of speech is a concrete illustration of the pliability of the English tongue. Now it is a verb, maliciously condemnatory in character; now an adjective; now an adverb; now a noun; now an interjection; and all with barely an inflection. It may not be too much to expect that the genius of a language which can accomplish such a *tour de force* as this may yet devise the means of employing the word as a conjunction. In fact, so common has its use become nowadays that utterance without it seems to be as asyndetic as the style of Tacitus. For our purpose, however, the importance of the word does not lie in the diversity of its service, but rather in that it is used at all in its original senses by us enlightened moderns, and even then used so frequently, for in itself this phenomenon is proof that we are not so far removed from primitive habits of thought as we sometimes fondly think we are. It is indeed hard to believe that when the "man on the street" says "damn this" or "damn that," with or without malice prepense, he is thereby proclaiming that in one particular at least he retains the taint of a primeval barbarism, a barbarism as old as Sumer and Accad and as extensive as heathendom. It is hard, I say, to believe this of the man who rubs shoulders with us daily; yet it is true, and lest any should doubt it, we propose to trace the practice back to some of the earliest of human records. We disclaim, however, all intention of following the example of a certain modern author who investigated an allied subject and entitled his lucubrations "A Cursory History of Swearing."

The habit of summary condemnation to which we have referred belongs to the great and comprehensive sphere of magic which is so characteristic of uncivilized and partially civilized communities and which has so many features in common with primitive religion that not even a Frazer with the witchery of his Golden Bough can definitely "beat the bounds" between the two types of thought. Moreover, it so broadly overlaps the workday life of barbaric man that not a single detail of his existence is untouched by it. What Professor Breasted says concerning the ancient Egyptians may be predicated of all undeveloped peoples: "The belief in magic penetrated the whole substance of life . . . . constantly appearing in the simplest acts of the daily household routine, as much a matter of course as sleep or the preparation of food."

As far as can be determined, this universal applicability of magic seems ultimately to rest on the supposed reality of two principles. The one is the mechanical power of mere analogy and mere imitation; that is, primitive man believes that if he happens to be unable to attain certain desired results by the processes which regularly produce these results, he can achieve his end through the employment of analogous processes. This, for example, is the principle invoked by the superstitious Scotch Highlander who makes a clay image of his enemy and casts it into a running stream, trusting that just as the water gradually disintegrates the earthern figure, so will his enemy suffer slow but certain dissolution. In Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native* a parallel instance is to be found. The other principle is the alleged existence of potencies, or spirits, in all the objects, animate or inanimate, which environ man. These, it is believed, we can control as we will, provided we know the proper method, averting the injurious and summoning the helpful; but as their name is legion our human life must of necessity be one endless round of recourse to this or to that form of the black art.

The magical mind also invokes two other principles which are virtually corollaries of the foregoing. Primitive man has an unshaken conviction in the substantial reality of the spoken as well as of the written word, and in the absolute identity of a name with the object or person for which it stands; and if we

children of this generation of fact fail to appreciate the tenacity of this conviction, in spite of its patent absurdity, we shall fall far short of understanding the function of the curse. Doubtless the pragmatist would say that if the curse "works," the principles on which it rests are true. At all events, primitive man believes that your name, be it 'Arry or 'Arriet, is not merely a conventional label to identify you, but is in fact none other than you yourself. He holds, moreover, that if in speech or writing he couples this name of yours with some wish concerning it, you will inevitably fare well or fare ill according to the denotation of the language employed. According to this theory, then, the only reason why the race of man has not been exterminated long ere this day is that in some way or other we fortunate survivors have managed, deliberately or accidentally, to annul the curses pronounced against us, or that our enemies have omitted some essential jot or tittle of the formulæ to which they resorted. The ancients long wondered why the supremacy of Rome was unthreatened for so many centuries. But at length the secret was revealed. *Roma*, it seems, was as it were only a sobriquet of the city, and the frantic curses of Parthian and Carthaginian glanced off it as arrows off a coat of mail. Rome's real name was guarded like the mysteries of Eleusis, but who the person was that finally let the cat out of the bag we leave to a German seminar to discover.

But all pleasantry aside, the masses of ancient Greece and Rome actually believed in the efficacy of the curse. Even Plato, both in the *Republic* and in the *Laws*, alludes to the practice in a way which implies popular belief in it. To him the imprecations of Œdipus upon his sons, of Theseus upon Hippolytus, of Amyntor upon Phœnix were cruel facts, and he puts into the mouth of Adimantus the statement that if a man but will to injure an enemy, the curse lay ready at hand as the weapon with which to effect it. So real was it to the Roman that in the Twelve Tables he incorporated threats of punishment against those who should attempt by this craven method to harm the person, property, or family of a fellow-citizen. There is ample evidence to show that the menace of the law did much to encourage secrecy in the performance of this form of sorcery.

In addition to this clandestine cursing there was a great deal of open cursing in the ordinary conversation between man and man, some of which was no doubt seriously intended but a great deal of which was as perfunctory and as much due to unconscious habit as are most of the interjections which punctuate English dialogue. Of this Aristophanes and Menander, Plautus and Terence are witnesses. Nevertheless, the bitter retorts which these vicious thrusts provoked are sufficient proof that the words were not felt to be shafts wholly without point and barb, and perhaps a goodly part of our anger at curses against ourselves may be due to a relic within us of this naïve belief. Even now I almost tremble when I think of the terrible reviling to which I was subjected a few years ago in Italy. I had refused to give alms to a certain ancient Canidia who was begging by the wayside, and so vitriolic were her curses that I fairly felt poisoned for life. Yet I might have spared myself this torture had I but heeded the warning words of Solomon, who well knew the ways of the Oriental mendicant: "He that giveth unto the poor shall not lack: but he that hideth his eyes shall have many a curse."

In Greece the imprecation has a long and honorable history. The mythology is full of it. Two or three instances have already been given, but without being fulsome we may mention a few more. Althæa killed her son Meleager by means of a curse reinforced by the sympathetic magic of the burning brand. Theseus cursed the Athenians when he departed for Scyros. The faithless Myrtilus met his death through the curse cast upon him by his master Œnomaus, and himself with his dying breath uttered a retaliatory curse upon the whole line of Pelops. Even before this, Pelops had visited upon Laius of Thebes the curse of childlessness. The horrible fate of Pelias was the long postponed result of the evil prayer of Jason's mother. The sad end of the Atridæ was but the issue of the curse of Thyestes.

But there is something more here than the mere recital of malevolent wishes and their consummation. Viewed from one angle these stories are but a manner of recording the observations of the Greeks upon certain ethical problems which perplex us of to-day. Why are some families pursued from generation to generation by an apparently inescapable demon of pain and ca-

lamity? Why has this or that great man been suddenly cut off in his prime? The reasons are inscrutable, we say, and we dismiss the problem. To the Greeks, however, the explanation was simple. At some time or other, they said in effect, somebody cursed the ancestor of a family line and thereafter a moral taint lay upon his descendants. The original curse was purely arbitrary, to be sure, but the transmission of its virulence from generation to generation followed as a law of nature. Indeed, the Greek was not far from literally repeating the words so well known to a certain Syrian people, and, in these latter days, to ourselves: "Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generations," and "Hath this man sinned, or his parents?" His reasoning was a strange anticipation of the modern biological theory which recognizes that the germ cell is as much the source of moral tendencies as it is of bodily characteristics.

But the belief in cursing is also an objective fact in sober history. Both Diodorus and Plutarch record that the Eumolpid priests officially laid a curse upon Alcibiades for his deliberate impiety. All classical students are aware that the technical objection which the Spartans raised against Pericles was the fact that his family, the Alcmæonids, had been under the shadow of a curse for three centuries. The historian, however, is not our only source of information in these matters; we have original documents at our disposal, the most notable of which is an inscription of the fifth century B.C. from the island of Teos. The text of this is inscribed upon two marble pillars and contains some forty odd lines; the quotation of a few of these will suffice to show the spirit of the entire document: "Whosoever employs baneful drugs against the Teian state or against its citizens, may he and his family perish. Whosoever hinders the importation of grain into the land of Teos by any device or stratagem, whether by sea or by land, or withholds grain from sale when it has been so imported, may he and his family perish. May any official who shall fail to enforce this curse himself be subject to it. Whosoever shall fracture the pillars on which this curse is written or shall chisel out the letter or shall destroy the inscription, may that man and his family perish." It might not

be unprofitable for our modern law-makers to take a hint from the Teians and by means of magical imprecations secure from magistrate and civilian alike that kind of loyalty to office and state which we endeavor to effect by the more or less idle threat of legal penalties.

The Roman, also, made generous use of the curse as a weapon against his foes. Often the victories of his armies were believed to be due, in the last analysis, far more to a preparatory bombardment of malediction than to the strategy of generals. And then, when the enemies' stronghold had been carried and razed to the ground, the curse was invoked to blast the site forever and make it unfit thenceforth for human habitation. Could we return to the primeval *naïveté* of our forefathers we should probably account for the wilderness that once was Carthage by the spell cast upon that city by the triumphant Scipio, or the squalor and insignificance of modern Corinth by the curse of the conquering Mummius. Perhaps, too, we might trace the final defeat of Hannibal back to the maledictions which the outraged people of Saguntum hurled upon the head of him who had brutally violated an innocent neutrality and treated an international agreement as a scrap of paper. If the principle is established by this precedent, here is the opportunity for a Belgian revenge.

The Greeks and Romans, however, were not the only peoples of the Mediterranean basin who were acquainted with the curse; the Semites, and among them the Hebrews, knew it and practised it. Naturally, the official religion with its high conceptions of deity and morality recognized the power to bless and to curse as the prerogative of God alone, but the masses of the people flouted the denunciations of priest and prophet, and insisted, with the Phœnician and Moabite, that blessing and cursing were also functions of mortal man. As is to be expected, the latter function was discharged much more frequently than the former, since the hand and heart of man are quicker to work evil than good. Sometimes the people appealed to them "that had familiar spirits," to "wizards that peep and mutter," for help in their nefarious designs, but ordinarily they attempted to achieve their desire unassisted. That the attempt was regarded by the better classes as a heinous offence there is ample testimony throughout

the Bible. For instance, when Balaam set out upon his errand to curse Israel, he was halted by God himself and persuaded to pronounce blessings instead. Again, one of the facts that Job adduced to prove his own integrity was that he had never suffered his mouth to sin by wishing a curse to his enemy's soul. Now this conviction of the sinfulness of the practice could not have existed had the common people at all questioned its potency, and none knew better than Jesus himself what a hard precept he was enjoining upon men in requiring them not merely to manifest the noble, though negative quality of self-restraint in refusing to return a curse for a curse, but to exercise the positive virtue of requiting a curse with a blessing.

Yet the Hebrews did not confine themselves to this relatively petty conception of the curse; like the Greeks, as we have already seen, they also viewed it as the ultimate explanation of the evil bent of certain persons and certain family strains, and of the innate perversity of all the children of Adam. It accounted also for many of those sudden calamities in human life which but few believe to be wholly fortuitous—the humbling of princes, the flight of wealth, the visitation of plague, the stroke of death, the invasion of enemies. Indeed, it was thought to be through a curse that Babylon, "that great city is fallen, fallen." And if we put any faith in the apocryphal Book of Jubilees we can there learn that the reason for the utter disappearance of the Philistines from the face of the earth is the solemn curse laid upon them by Isaac.

However, the curse was chiefly an instrument of private rather than of public vengeance, for all phases of magic have always been essentially anti-social, and it is in this capacity that we may see it at its best, or, as one may interpret it, at its worst. While much the greater number of extant curse-tablets are inscribed with Greek formulæ, yet enough have been found inscribed with Latin to prove that the device was well known to all classes of Roman society as of Greek.

The simplest form of the curse-tablet is a roughly rectangular sheet of lead of about the area of half a dozen postage stamps. Upon this was incised the name of an enemy and it was then thrown into a body of water or a grave. In Greek lands several

large deposits of these have been found in dried-up wells or opened graves. In this easy and clandestine fashion the resorter to magic drowned or buried his enemy. Moreover, the death-stroke of the curse was supposed to reach past the mortal body to the very soul and to dispatch it, too, to the end of time. In the later period of the practice the sprits of those drowned at sea, or of the dead within the tombs into which the leaden tablets were cast, were brought in some mysterious way to communicate the wish of the curser to the gods of the lower regions, who were bound by the very nature of magic to put the curses into effect. In other words, the layer of lead was a letter, as it is actually called in one tablet; the grave or well was the letter-box in the nether postal service; the spirits of the departed, especially of those who had died violent or premature deaths, were the postmen; and the infernal gods were the receiving correspondents. To continue the figure, the proper incantation of a formula when the letter was dropped into the box was tantamount to a special stamp insuring prompt delivery and an equally prompt reply.

The most highly developed form of the curse-tablet is exceedingly complicated and has the marks of studied organization. The simple form that we have just surveyed was such that even a fool or a wayfaring man could use it effectually without training. The use of the elaborate form, on the contrary, was confined to those who had been tutored by experts in the magical liturgies. Furthermore, this professional class, fearful of a shrinking of their revenues, after the manner of the master soothsayers at Philippi, took great care that the layman should learn as little as possible of their craft. In brief, they managed to secure a monopoly of magical operations, constituting themselves a sort of Magic Trust Company which had as the main clause of its charter, so to speak, the artificial character of its formulæ.

We shall now consider one of these complicated formulæ, choosing as the most suitable for our purpose one of the five Roman tablets of the early Augustan period that are now in the Archæological Museum of the Johns Hopkins University. A condensed translation would run on this wise:

"Good and beautiful Proserpina [or Salvia, shouldst thou prefer], mayest thou wrest away the health, body, complexion,

strength, and faculties of Plotius and consign him to thy husband, Pluto. Grant that by his own devices he may not escape this penalty. Mayest thou consign him to the quartian, tertian and daily fevers to war and wrestle with him until they snatch away his very soul. Wherefore I hand over this victim to thee, Proserpina [or, shouldst thou prefer, Acherusia]. Mayest thou summon for me the three-headed hound Cerberus to tear out the heart of Plotius, and mayest thou pledge thyself to give him three offerings—dates, figs, and a black swine—should he finish his task before the month of March. These offerings, Proserpina, I shall entrust to thee as soon as thou shalt have made good my vow. Proserpina Salvia, I give thee the head of Plotius, the slave of Avonia, his brow and eyebrows, eyelids, and pupils, I give thee his ears, nose, nostrils, tongue, lips, and teeth, so he may not speak his pain; his neck, shoulders, arms, and fingers, so that he may not aid himself; his breast, liver, heart, and lungs, so he may not locate his pain; his bowels, belly, navel and flanks, so he may not sleep the sleep of health; his thighs, legs, knees, shanks, feet, ankles, heels, toes, and toe-nails, so he may not stand of his own strength. As Plotius has prepared a curse against me, in like manner do I consign him to thee to visit a curse on him ere the end of February. May he most miserably perish and depart this life. Mayest thou so irrevocably damn him that his eyes may never see the light of another month."

A study of the plan of this curse throws much light on the methods of the ancient magician. First, the Queen of Hades is invoked, care being taken to use her real and essential name, for this, as opposed to a nickname, inextricably bound the god, willy-nilly, to the speaker's service. The nether queen is now coerced, though under the inoffensive guise of prayer, to cast a series of veritable Egyptian plagues on the hapless victim. In a most diabolically systematic manner these are told of one by one. Their full tale is calculated to imbue with pain every significant feature of the man's anatomy from crown to toe. The next conspicuous item is the presence of precautionary clauses: not till the goddess grants the wish will the fee be paid, and the petitioner, in a naïve retaliatory spirit, metes out his curse as the

curse has been meted out to him. The formula concludes with an impressive recapitulation, the purpose of which is to leave no doubt that the victim is destroyed, body and soul, to all eternity. As a sort of duplicate surety the document was folded, probably to enclose the victim's soul. An iron spike was then driven through the metal so as to pierce the contained soul, this constituting the technical act of defixion which has given this form of the curse its name, *defixio*.

We do not have to leave Canada, however, to find specimens of curse-tablets, for all told there are four at present in the Royal Ontario Museum of Archæology. Two are still folded up and pierced by the defixing nail and are therefore undeciphered, but the remaining two have been successfully read. One of these, a circular plaque of thin lead, which was originally neither pierced nor folded, is inscribed with a Greek formula which might possibly be of service to any of us when involved in a lawsuit. It reads:—

"I bind, I bind, the tongue, body, feet, and hands of Aristobulus. I bind the feet, tongue, household, strength, and body of Aristobulus my opponent at law. I bind the tongue, body, feet, strength, and all the counsellors of Aristobulus. I bind Aristobulus, my opponent, himself." At this point the author of the imprecation is compelled to cease, not through virtue or satiety, but simply for the lack of further space.

Hardly a single field of activity was unusurped by the curse. We see it even essaying the rôle of a Sherlock Holmes or of an entire Scotland Yard, theft being the crime most frequently pursued. As a rule the curser seeks one or all of certain objects, first and chiefly, the recovery of the stolen goods; then the detection of the thief, if he is unknown, and lastly his punishment. A curse very typical of this class is recorded in the Book of Judges (xvii, 1-2): "And there was a man of Mount Ephraim, whose name was Micah. And he said unto his mother, The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from thee and about which thou cursedst, and spakest of also in mine ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it." Discovery and restitution seldom result so speedily from the employment of our clumsy modern methods. Probably what Micah's mother said,

or wrote, in substance, is expressed in so many words in a tablet found on the site of an ancient Roman colony in Portugal. "O Proserpina," says the petitioner, in brief, "I ask, entreat, and implore thee to punish the person, whoever he be, who has borrowed, or stolen, or abstracted from my wardrobe six shirts and two linen cloaks." As to the success of the entreaty we are left wholly in the dark. But sometimes the ancients were forehanded and did not postpone action until a theft had actually taken place—an anticipation of our modern system of burglar-insurance. For instance, the dainty owner of a pretty Greek vase found at Cumæ took the precaution of inscribing on this article of property "I am Tataie's oil-flask, and whoever steals me will be struck blind."

That the spirit and practice of intimidation by magical threat have not altogether vanished from the earth I am reminded by an experience of my youth. Years ago when I was attending a certain Canadian High School the life of the school was disturbed for several weeks by the occurrence of a number of petty thefts. At last the guilt was definitely fixed upon a certain boy, and one morning shortly afterward the following inscription, barring a change of name, appeared on the walls of a cloakroom:—

> "John Doe, accursèd be thy soul!
> Toronto prison is thy goal.
> Return the football and the whole
> Of all the money that you stole."

It might easily be thought that the softer side of human life would be left untouched by the poison of the curse,—the affairs of the heart, for instance. But to believe that is to confess ignorance of human nature. Shakespeare, however, was not deceived, for he makes Vénus say to her reluctant Adonis:—

> "Where Love reigns, disturbing Jealousy
> Doth call himself Affection's sentinel;
> Gives false alarms, suggesteth mutiny,
> And in a peaceful hour doth cry, 'Kill, kill!'
> Distempering gentle Love in his desire,
> As air and water do abate the fire."

The vindictive appeal of a rejected affection that we find on a *defixio* from Latium falls little short of this cry of "Kill, kill!"

Incidentally, it illustrates how the principle of analogy is employed by the magician.

"Just as the dead who here lies buried can neither speak nor converse, so may Rhodine, as far as Marcus Licinius Faustus is concerned, be dead and be unable to speak or to converse. Just as the dead is received neither among gods nor among men, so may Rhodine be unacceptable to M. Licinius and have as little influence with him as has this dead man who here lies buried. O Father Pluto, I hand over Rhodine to thee that she may ever be an object of hatred to M. Licinius Faustus." The author of this malediction withholds her name, but not wholly for the poet's reason that "Jealousy dislikes the world to know it." The fear of the law and of retaliation availed much to restrain her, and, morever, we cannot neglect the possibility that she now considered Faustus lost to her forever and was therefore seeking only the satisfaction of revenge upon her hated rival.

In our modern sophistication we smile at her credulity the smile of the superior, but we ought to acknowledge a just rebuke when we reflect that such simplicity still exists upon the earth and in an enlighted community at that. The following specimen of the curse appeared in a daily newspaper of Nancy, France, in March 1910:

"Great Saint Exterminus, I conjure thee to go and torment the soul and spirit of Madame Fernande X, . . . who now resides in Paris, through the avenues of her five natural senses. May she be tormented, besieged by the desire to leave her husband. So be it. Great Saint Exterminus, I conjure thee to go and torment the spirit of Madame X's husband through his five natural senses. May he be unable to live without me. May he love only me. May his wife abandon him. Reunite us, great Saint Exterminus. So be it. Great Saint Exterminus, I conjure thee to go and torment the spirit of my own husband through his five senses. May he have only one idea—to give me money. Great Saint Exterminus, thou whose power is so vast, bring me once more to the man whom I love. I conjure thee. So be it."

I have already quoted a curse inscribed upon an oil-flask that threatened a contingent thief with blindness. The principle of

anticipation employed here is applied to other kinds of property also, and that throughout a geographical area extending from Mesopotamia to the western shores of the Mediterranean. It is most commonly found in connection with tombs. The longest and most complex formulæ appear in districts occupied by Semites. These represent the defunct as calling down dire imprecations upon the life of him who will be so bold as even to scribble on the sepulchre, alter the inscription in any way, mutilate the stone, or sell the land on which it is erected. Formulæ of substantially the same intent have been discovered by the American excavators of Sardis, and numbers have been unearthed in the old Italian cemeteries, notably in and around Rome. Some of these are composed in verse, which is not of the best either, but doubtless this added horror to the deterring threats. At all events, the defunct had spared no pains to ensure himself a peaceful and undisturbed rest for all eternity.

A no less ingenious utilization of this device is seen in an early Christian community which had not entirely shaken off its pagan associations. In the Cyrenaica the American archæologists have found this inscription on a stone that originally belonged to a church: "If any one harms this temple of the worshippers in this place, trample down his house and in one generation obliterate his name and destroy his portion with the God-slaying Jews, but fail not to bless the race of those who give thought to thy temple, unto the end of the age." It is to be noted that the church officials call upon their patron saint in exactly the same way as their pagan forebears called upon the divinities of the Underworld.

In considering the curse we cannot pass over its natural ally, the oath. Wellhausen has described it as a provisional curse, a definition that will explain the popular tendency to regard swearing and cursing as identical. The simplest form of the oath may be observed in the language of that well-known type of petty vender who says of his wares: "I swear they are genuine, may God strike me dead if they are not!" words that never deceive any but the confirmed simpleton, for in itself the asseveration betrays a conscience which realizes that reverence for the truth is not one of its habits. They seem to be an echo of an

Oriental bazaar. Indeed, it was this very practice of extravagant statement in the transactions of the market-place that Jesus attacked when he exhorted men to make their speech "yea, yea, and nay, nay." He saw very clearly that a society in which simple declaration of fact was not sufficient to establish confidence between man and man was fundamentally perverse and incapable of intellectual and spiritual progress. There is no doubt that originally the oath was used with due consciousness of its real meaning; but that it had to be used at all is a pointed commentary upon prevailing social conditions. In process of time frequent employment of it dulled the perception of men as to its import, and they eventually ceased to believe one another even when truly sworn; the last state of that society was worse than the first.

Now elucidation of this matter enables us, if not exactly to rehabilitate the reputation of the Apostle Peter, at least to make it perfectly clear that when he cursed and swore to the handmaid in the high priest's hall he was not giving vent to the ribald profanity of an angry street ruffian. While it is impossible for us to produce his exact language, we can be sure of its substance. Charged with being a companion of Jesus Peter denied that he knew him. To a second charge he made denial again. A third charge, however, was too much for the impulsive disciple and in his spleen he said in effect: "No, I do not know this man of whom you speak. I swear I do not, and may God in Heaven curse me if ever I saw him before this night." Then rang out the reminding cry of the cock, and Peter came to himself. Besides being a deserter and a liar he had fallen from the noble ideal of the simple yea, yea, and nay, nay. "And when he thought thereon, he wept."

The many instances of oaths in classical literature are of the same nature as those that we have drawn from life in Palestine, and no further illustration is required. Yet one must remember that even if the imprecatory part of the formula may not be recorded by the author, it is nevertheless present by implication. The skeptical Ovid, who like Horace was always ready to poke fun at popular faith and credulity, alludes to all the essential elements of the oath in certain of his amatory pleasantries:—

"Believe that gods exist! She broke her vow;
Her face, though, beauteous then, is beauteous now.
. . . . . .
"By her own eyes my darling lately swore,
And then by mine; and mine are aching sore.
. . . . . .
"Were I a god I'd see no damage came
To pretty maid for swearing by my name.
Yes, I'd swear truth at any odds!
You would not class *me* with the gloomy gods.
But thou, fair damsel, use the great god's prize!
More moderately; or spare, at least, mine eyes."[1]

At this point there is an easy transition to what we may call, without paradox, the literary curse. Once more Ovid is the author on whom we draw and we shall allow him to interpret in epitome his own poem, the *Ibis*, a work which, for obvious reasons, is not regularly prescribed for undergraduate reading. Heretofore, says Ovid, my Muse has borne no weapons, and not a single stain of blood mars my pages. All the missiles I have hurled from my sling have missed their mark and bounded back to the hurt only of the one who hurled them. But now must the Muse don armor and her darts must strike the butt, for an insidious and skilful foe has done me a grievous injury. With his vicious lampoons he has exposed me to public ridicule and ignominy. But an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a lampoon for a lampoon. Revenge is sweet. With the same curse with which Callimachus once sent the soul of Ibis to Tartarus thither do I now send thee and thine, O unnamed enemy.

Then follows the curse, a torrent of vituperation six hundred verses long, which, were they not tempered by rhythm and style, would deservedly be called downright Billingsgate. Though the poem is a perfect hymn of hate, yet there is method in its madness, the method of the professional sorcerer whose art we have seen in the tablets of defixion. First he invokes the gods, the greater and the lesser, summoning them as it were within a magic circle to work his bidding. Next follows the imprecation in which he prays down upon his victim all the dire afflictions to which human flesh is heir. Visit upon him, he entreats, pain,

[1] Translated by Professor Rand of Harvard.

hunger, sleeplessness, impotency, care, mental anguish, and the consciousness of eternal disgrace. But ordinary pain will not suffice; it must be pain in every member, bone and muscle, pain beyond words to tell, pain so great that it will go with the victim beyond the grave to the Styx and Acheron. Last of all Ovid demands death—death by drowning, death by fire, death by torture, death by sword; to parody a popular expression, all deaths looked alike to Ovid, provided the hated foe should by any one of them be left really dead, and in the land of the departed suffer the combined agonies of Ixion, Sisyphus, Tantalus and the rest of the tormented shades.

To listen to such a recital is like entering a chamber of horrors—if one take the sentiments too seriously. But he who does that knows not Ovid. The very extravagance of ill will is indication enough that the whole piece is a burlesque. If incongruity is the source of all humor, surely the incongruity existing here between the consummate technique of a master of verse and the barbaric spirit of a plebeian superstition is sufficient to give the *Ibis* of Ovid the place in the humorous literature of Rome which the curse in *Tristram Shandy* occupies in the literature of England. We are quite free to interpret the real purpose of the poem as a *reductio ad absurdum* of a custom which because of its cruel intent had a disintegrating effect upon society. In no other way can one account for the prodigality of Ovid's *Schrecklichkeit.*

The example of Horace is more wholesome. He, too, had his pet enemy, but even in wishing a hearty "bad cess" to him he never forgot his golden *ne quid nimis* nor to interlineate his censure with smiles. Both he and Vergil loathed Mævius, but neither took the halter off his power to image evil and let it rage afield without control. Yet there is a difference between them, as we should expect; Vergil contents himself with the quick thrust of an allusion, while Horace takes up the slower weapon of defixion. I venture thus to render his tenth epode in verse:—

Sped by a curse of hate
A ship puts out to sea
With Mævius for freight,
My noisome enemy.

Rave, rave, then South Wind, rave,
  Buffeting fore and aft
With unabating wave
  His cursèd little craft.

And thou, O East Wind, cleave
  Its sheets and stays in twain;
Shiver its oars and leave
  Them drifting on the main.

Thou, too, O North Wind, blow
  With all thy furious might
That layeth forests low
  On the rugged mountain's height.

May not a star appear
  In heaven, however pale,
To light the dark and steer
  Him through the autumn gale.

And may those same wild seas
  That rose when Pallas frown'd
On Grecian argosies
  From Ilium homeward bound;

Aye, may that same wild storm
  Which sent foul Ajax under
Rage now and rend the form
  Of Mævius asunder.

Oh! from your sailors' brows
  What a red sweat will start,
As you raise coward vows
  To a Jove of harden'd heart,

When the Ionian sea,
  Lashed by the South Wind, rolls
Your craft relentlessly
  And casts it on the shoals!

If then your sodden clay
  Be thrown high on the rocks,
To cormorants a prey
  And other carrion flocks,

A lamb I'll sacrifice,
  And eke a kid, that night,
As none too great a price
  To token my delight.

But how strange is the irony of life and letters! Here in the words with which he would consign Mævius to oblivion Horace insures him immortality. Had he passed him by in disdainful

silence, Mævius would now be scarcely more than an item in a dry *index nominum;* and this on Horace's own testimony, for he says in one of the odes:—

> . . . . oblivion dark and long,
> Has locked men in a tearless grave,
> For lack of consecrating song.[2]

But who would expect us mortals to be absolutely consistent—especially in such affairs of the heart as poetry and cursing?

But there yet remains a poem which in my judgment is essentially the most humorous of all extant pieces of this order, since it depends for its effect upon intellectual subtlety, delicate allusion, restraint of desire and refinement of expression. To all of us who know the pinch of the increasing cost of living, and to those few who have endeavored to solve the problem by delusive investments in rural real estate, the point of this epigram of Martial is perfectly clear. The translation is that of the late Professor Kirby Flower Smith of the Johns Hopkins University.[3]

> Charinus pines with envy, bursts with spite;
> He weeps, he raves, indeed, the rumor goes,
> When once he finds a branch of proper height
> He means to hang himself and end his woes.
>
> Because my epigrams are said and sung
> From Thebes to Britain, Cadiz to Cathay?
> Because my book fares sumptuously along
> The thousand nations 'neath the Roman sway?
>
> Oh no. My country place just out of town,
> The span of mules I own,—Dame Rumor saith
> These be the things that cast Charinus down,
> These be the things that make him dream of death.
> . . . . . .
>
> What curse invoked repays such envy best?
> Severus, what's your judgment of the case?
> My own in just nine words may be expressed:
> I wish him this: my mules and country place.

W. Sherwood Fox.
Western University, London, Canada.

---

[2] Conington. [3] Published in the *Sewanee Review*, January, 1918.